

**THE NIGERIAN NATION AND MANAGEMENT OF
CONFLICTS AND CRISES**

Essay in honour of

Dr. J. O. Fadeiye

Edited by:

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**OMO-OJE PRESS AND PUBLISHERS, OYO,
OYO STATE NIGERIA**

FIRST PUBLISHED JULY, 2011

ISBN: 978-978-696-173-0

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

MANAGEMENT OF POVERTY AND ITS INHERENT CRISES AND CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

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Introduction

One major challenge confronting Africa is the problem of poverty, coming to the Nigeria situation, the phenomenon of poverty is a pervasive one in spite of her great natural wealth, Nigeria is poor and social development is limited. Since the global economic downturn and the dwindling petro-dollar income, more than 70 percent of Nigeria according to Manus (2009) live below the poverty line while some 35 percent wallow in abject poverty, in fact, real grinding poverty. To corroborate this scenario, Manus (2009) while quoting Nnamani informs us that "Nigeria is represented as pitiably sitting in the bowels of poverty as the 154th of 172 countries in the world poverty marginal index"

However, the government of Nigeria from federal 'to local level have since pre-occupied herself with programmes and strategies of alleviating poverty but we are yet to see any appreciable impact of all these programmes to which billions of naira is being spent. The church must collaborate with the government in its effort to manage poverty in our society. Striving to improve the living conditions of the poor, and to

save them from their plight is the best way of demonstrating the spirit of Christ.

What is Poverty?

Poverty has many dimensions, so, its definitions varies considerably. It is an intricate phenomenon that is susceptible to diverse definitions and conceptualizations. In other words, poverty means different things to different people or group of people.' For " example, what poverty means to somebody in a village differs greatly from what it means to somebody who lives in a city. Similarly, what poverty means to the developed countries differs from what it means to the developing countries.

Additionally, there is no area of academic that does not have distinct perceptions of poverty. To economists, poverty refers to people's inability to meet their basic needs of life such as. food, clothing, shelter, education, health, employment, security, basic infrastructures and so on. To political scientists, poverty is viewed in relation to lack of empowerment and security including deprivation in the most essential capabilities of life. To sociologists, poverty is lack of social infrastructures and opportunities in the society (see Qlatunde 2006),

Among Biblical Israel, it was variously used in Hebrew language as ani, anah and anaw to depict the state or condition of the people or person designated as poor, needy, oppressed, afflicted, humiliated, dispossessed, humble or meek. Its sister terms dal, one who is socially weak, frail and helpless, ebyon, one who begs for alms, rush, one who is poor and famished; all paints, the ugly - picture of the unfortunate victim of poverty.

In view of the foregoing, poverty may be seen as the collective condition of poor people, or of poor group: and in this sense entire nation

- states are sometimes regarded as poor. These nations are usually called the developing countries.

In the end however, irrespective of which of the definitions of poverty one accepts, there is a general agreement that the element that is most difficult for the-poor to bear is that they represent an island of deprivation in a sea of affluence.

TYPES OF POVERTY

Poverty according to Dzurgba (2006) can be categorized into three groups; Absolute poverty, Relative poverty and subjective-poverty.

Absolute Poverty: This is defined as lack of resources to meet one's daily needs such as food, clothing, shelter, education, information, health and so on. It is a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs as mentioned earlier.

Relative Poverty: This refers to a situation where somebody lacks the necessities of life as compared to what other people enjoy somewhere else. For example, people that live in the Aso Rock are exposed to maximum social amenities and infrastructural facilities, but this may not be of equal standard with what is put in place in the white House in Washington DC, and it goes on and on like .that. Under this category, nobody is absolutely free from poverty.

Subjective Poverty: Poverty becomes subjective when someone thinks he or she is affected by poverty. For example, somebody who was a billionaire, but as a result of economic downturn/ difficulty later becomes a millionaire; or somebody who had four cars before but now has two, will still complain of poverty because there is a lack somewhere.

Causes of Poverty: Poverty is a very complex issue in which various factors often play a part. Below are some of the corrosive factors that are responsible for the enormity and pervasive state of poverty in our country as pointed out by Akao (2000) Oshitelu (2001) Dada, (2001) Oniya (2004), Atere (2005) and Olatunde (2006).

Familia Causes: This factor attributes poverty to individual's family upbringing. People are poor because their families are poor. Poverty breeds poverty, and the cycle is not easily broken.

Sub-Cultural causes: This attributes poverty to common patterns of life, learned or shared within a community. In Nigeria, among the Yorubas and Igbos in particular, some aspects of the peoples' culture do encourage extravagance, which plays a prominent role in promoting poverty in the society. Take for instance, the prominence and value placed on burial ceremony in our culture.

Corruption: Corruption is rampant in the government and commercial structures of the country. Money meant for putting in place social amenities and infrastructural facilities, etc are being diverted into personal local and foreign accounts by public office holders leaving others in abject poverty.

Over-Population: The high rate of population growth in Nigeria is very alarming and this is without corresponding increase in the rate of supply of basic infrastructural facilities and services. This eventually led to poverty without measure.

Laziness: Nobody can miss hard-work and miss hard life. Many Nigerians are lazy and that is why many of them are poor. "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth..." (Prov. 10:4 - 5).

Unemployment: Unemployment is another factor that is 'responsible for prevalence of poverty in Nigeria. It promotes thuggery touting, begging, violence, prostitution, ritual killing and ultimately, armed-robbery.

Unequal Distribution of Resources: The economic policy of a country determines the state of poverty or prosperity in that particular country. Uneven distribution of resources expose many Nigerians to abject poverty.

Gender Inequality: Women are a disadvantaged group in many African societies including Nigeria. Educationally, some cultures do not believe in sending their female children to school. Many women also faced gender bias in terms of violent confrontations from their spouses which is tolerated in some cultures. Politically, women are given less decision making power and less control over people than men. Thus, gender inequality is a major factor that contributes to the increase of women poverty in Africa and Nigeria in particular.

Religious Belief: An individual religious belief or doctrine can hold him or her to a state of perpetual poverty. Some religious groups consider poverty as an ideal condition to-live in, a condition necessary in order to be closer to God, and also reach certain level of spiritual or intellectual status. Notable among these religious group are the traditional Catholics who viewed poverty as a natural condition, or God's will (Oshitelu, 2001).

An Overview of Poverty and Its Inherent Crises and Conflicts in Nigeria

As a matter of fact about 90 percent of Nigerian's crises and conflicts are caused by poverty. There is a manifestation of poverty in almost every aspect of our life. This ranges from food insecurity, to poor clothing, poor housing, poor transportation system, poor educational system, poor health facilities and services, erratic power supply, lack of potable and regular water supply and so on. Few of these inherent crises and conflicts are discussed below.

Food Insecurity. Lack of food is the mother of all lacks, it is the maximum degree or condition of poverty. Absence of food is usually associated with annoyance, sorrow, quarrel, violence, diseases and death. It is the maximum degree or condition of poverty. It is believed that many Nigerians are hungry, and that is why Nigerians are angry. This leads to the popular saying that 'a hungry man is an angry man'. Many families now

feed on ratio 1-1 (that is, breakfast minus lunch plus supper); while only a few could boast of balance diets. Many eat what they lay their hands upon for their physical survival and nothing else.

Lack of sufficient quality and quantity of food is associated with poor health and that is responsible for increase in infant mortality, sickness, diseases, stealing and death that have become so rampant in our society. Similarly, the brutality of the police on the high ways and the N20.00 syndrome are not unconnected with poverty.

In education, hunger affects a student's ability to effectively profit from the learning environment, and most hungry families withdraw their children from school to seek unproductive "employments like, house girl, pool house secretary, -bus conductor and so on. All these do not have a lasting value and can only complicate and perpetuate poverty in the family. Starvation has serious damaging effects on the economy because it is the abundance or lack of food that ultimately determines the performance or production of every Worker in all sectors of the economy. For instance, food is one of those things that determine the performances of a lecturer and that of the students in the classroom because from it we derive strength to work or perform.

Additionally, starvation is part of the root of all evils. Majority of people go into armed - robbery, prostitution/child abuse, human trafficking, kidnapping, ritual killing, 419 acts, etc originally to get food to eat. Every other thing they may acquire later is secondary to their original purpose. So, the more, starvation increases the greater these social vices also increase in the society (Shehu El-Hafiz, 2009). Today, the country is becoming one of the largest countries with HIV/AIDS victims in the world. This is not unconnected with poverty.

One of the factors that contribute to inaccessibility of food to many Nigerians is high food prices coupled with unemployment, devaluation of the currency, and high rate of inflation which drastically reduces the purchasing power of the individuals,

Poor Clothing: Just like food, clothing is paramount to human existence. Nobody can live in the realm of humanity without clothe to cover his or her nakedness, except in a case of insanity. Thus, clothing is natural, and a basic necessity of life.

Many Nigerians however, jack the basic financial resources for proper clothing in the society due to unemployment, low income, irregular payment of salaries, high cost of education for their children, and so on. As a result of this inimical condition, average Nigerians resort to fairly used or second – hand (*tokunbo*) clothing materials which incidentally fill all our markets, and which sell cheaper and even faster than the new ones. In the year 2005, a popular Chinese market in Lagos was closed down on the allegation that the marketers were turning the country into a dumping ground for substandard goods. The Chinese traders responded to the allegation in this way: "...the fact that many Nigerians could not afford expensive goods informed the need to bring in such substandard goods they could afford" (Tribune, 19th. Nov., 2005, p.3). And now that the Federal Government of Nigeria has laid embargo on the importation of such clothing materials, people find it difficult to abide, by such legislation and thus, designed various illegal means of bringing in such materials.

Moreover, an average Nigerian is not selective\about what he or she wears. Certain clothe that is designed for rainy seasons is used during dry seasons and vice-versa. And one sees somebody boasting that he has been wearing a particular clothe for the past ten years. All these are manifestations of poverty and its inherent crises and conflicts in the land.

Poor Housing: Housing is one of the most universally recognized basic needs of humanity. A proper housing according to Olatunde (2006) must not ordinarily serve as a shelter but must include all the necessary facilities, equipment and services such as electricity, proper ventilation, hygienic toiletry, potable water, furniture, telephone, security fence,

access to a major road, and other infrastructures needed for human comfort. This is inevitable because affordable and good housing constitutes a critical condition for the physical, psychological, social and economic well-being of human beings.

However, despite government efforts to reduce housing problems in the country, many Nigerians are still homeless, and find abode under fly-overs and kiosks. We see family of eight or ten living in one or two rooms, especially in cities like Lagos, Ibadan, Kano, Portharcourt, etc. and even in the rural areas, one sees old mud houses about to collapse housing many extended families. Many live in dilapidated or uncompleted houses at the expense of their personal safety. All these are reflections of poverty, and they have a very serious health, security or environmental hazards on the people of this country. In the words of Prof. Idowu Olayinka quoted by Olatunde (2006); "Poor people typically face greater environmental risks in their surroundings because they live in unhealthy locations and they lack the financial resources to pay for health services, food, .clean water, sanitation and other key input that help to produce -good health".

The reason for this poor housing condition is strictly connected with the high population growth. Similarly, the high prices of land and building materials, which go beyond the capability of average Nigerians has really compounded the pervasiveness of housing problems in the country.

Bribery and Corruption: Bribery and corruption are closely associated with poverty. This is a country where one can hardly "obtain any favour free -of-charge, including those that belong to you by right. You have to buy your right otherwise you may be delayed or denied completely. Corruption is rampant in government and commercial structures of the country. Despite government efforts to curb financial crimes and other corrupt practices through institutionalized agencies like Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) and Independent Corrupt Practices and other

related offences Commission (ICPC), our public office holders are "still diverting the- public funds to their personal accounts for fear of poverty in the future, after they have tasted maximum life of affluence in government.

Religious Decadence: Similarly, the enormity of poverty in the country had equally influenced our religious leaders and their numerous followers. This is an era of compromise, changing of identity and message; intra church conflict becomes rampant in our society all because of money. Religious leaders now seek power from strange sources in order to see vision and perform miracles just to acquire wealth. In the same way, the astronomical increase, in the number of churches in the recent times is partly associated with pervasive influence of poverty in the land. Muslims clerics are now fighting against one another all because of money, while Islamic sects are unusually increasing tremendously. Also, majority of Babalawos (Ifa priests) are no longer following the ethics and philosophy of Ifa, which was supposed to be truth and justice. Many of them are now liars and thieves.

Generally speaking, our religious, moral and ethical values are depreciating rapidly as a result of our negative aspirations or approaches to tackling poverty in the land. Religious ethics are no longer reflected in business, contracts, civil service, and politics. We can sing wonderful songs and preach wonderful sermons but when it comes to money, people quickly forget their identity; and easily: compromise their faith. The question now is what role can the church play in order to manage all these crises and conflicts?

Management of Poverty: The Role of the Church

As earlier said, about 90 percent of the crises and conflicts we are experiencing in Nigeria could be traced to poverty. If this is so, shall we 'then fold our hands and be looking even as a church? The fact is that government alone cannot shoulder the/responsibility of .managing poverty in the country. Poverty management should be a collaborative

effort between the government, the Non-governmental organizations, the church and every Individual that is directly affected .with poverty (Olatunde, 2006).

However, many Christians limit the activities of the church to worship, prayer and fasting, religious instruction or evangelism and the nurturing of personal spirituality. But the meaning of the church as the people of God is much more intimately tied to the welfare of the hungry, the poor, the needy, orphans, widow, unemployed, physically challenged and the oppressed. Indeed, Christians must not fail to see that the challenges of world hunger constitute a theological crisis for the church as well as political, social and economic crisis for the world. Jesus from the beginning of his ministry identified with the poor and the oppressed. At the public inauguration of his ministry, Jesus said:

The Spirit of the sovereign LORD is on me, because: The LORD has anointed me to preach good news to Poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn (Luke 4:16-19)

In the same manner, the earliest believers sold all their material possessions and distributed those in need (Act 2: 44 - 45). The Macedonian church, although in "extreme poverty" itself, joyfully participated in assistance to others who were poor (II Corinthians 8:1-3). Below mentioned are some of the ways by which the church could help in the business of poverty management in Nigeria (cf Abogunrin, 1986, Mahali, 2007and Oshitelu, 2001).

Capital Investment: The church in order to actively involved in the management of poverty can embark on a broader based economic venture, which could create employment for as many people as possible.

The area to be explored is agriculture, to which the government has not been paying the much - desired attention, due to over-dependence on oil,

Professional Assistance: Christians who are professionals can use their gifts, abilities to help those wallowing in poverty. Medical doctors can provide free health care for the poor. Educators can provide literacy and remedial studying programmes. Those in business can impart job skills that can make the poor to be self-reliant. This can be done by organizing vocational trainings from time to time.

Sharing Resources: According to Abogunrin (1986), the church must be ready to share their material possessions with the poor. Several examples are found in the New Testament (e.g. Acts 2:44 - 45; II Cor. 9:7). In the Old Testament, there are two means adopted to help the poor. The first was through the gleaning law found in Leviticus 19:9-10 and Deut. 24:19-20. As farmers reaped their crops, they would leave the corners of their fields unharvested, and anything that fell on to the ground, was left for the poor. The second method was through charity tithe found in Deut. 14: 28 - 29. This form of tithe was used to cater for the needs of the poor in ancient Israelite society. The church should therefore, pull her resources together to combat poverty in our society.

Addressing Corruption: The church is charged not only with the responsibility of praying for the government but also to criticize and call the leaders to order wherever they are doing contrary to the will of God and to the will of the masses. Thus, the church should be bold enough like the Old Testament prophets to speak out against corruption that is now rampant in all the tiers of government and the commercial structures of the nation.

Addressing Laziness: The church at every available opportunity should admonish people whose poverty is as a result of their laziness or poor work habits so that they may work harder in order to become rich. Proverbs 10:4 says, "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth." Paul in the New Testament said, "...If a man will not work, he

shall not eat". (2 Thessalonians 3:10). Hard—work is imperative for somebody who is ready to overcome poverty. Nobody can miss hard - work, and miss hard life. Nothing woks until you work it?

Campaign for the Rights of Women: According to Atere (2005), women and children are the most vulnerable sets of people affected by poverty. Thus, the church should campaign seriously for the rights of women, children and young people, especially against their economic and sexual exploitation. The church should equally campaign against gender inequality and promote teachings on gender equity.

Public Enlightenment: The church should help in educating the public for a change of attitude to the poor which should be compassionate and redemptive rather than punitive and grudging. Also, the gospel message should be preached to the, industrialist that in their decision making process, profit, gain and machine should not be the thing to be considered alone but also the interest of the human elements (see Akao, 2000).

Christian Cooperative Societies. Bayo Obijole (1993) suggested some of the ways Christian communal effort can be geared towards development and poverty alleviation. In his opinion, "Christian cooperative societies can be established to run commercial and financial enterprise along Christian lines. Christian can and should join hands together to float a bank to be called Christian Development Bank to help the poor ones among us and help in healing the ailing economy of our dear country.

Christian Participation in Politics: Christians cannot continue to be "outside looking in" criticizing after decisions affecting millions might have been taken. We are walled in from the world. We are so afraid to take down the wall and go into the world. I am suggesting that more Christians should get actively involved in the political activities of their communities whether at the local, state and national level. Thus, the church should encourage and support Christians who are in 'politics in order to better the lot of the poor masses.

It is recommended that every Christian organization should inaugurate special agency or commission for poverty alleviation programmes with particular attention to vocational training and empowerment. Kudos to Roman Catholic church and church of Nigeria Anglican Communion and other few Christian organizations who already have such agency or commission in existence (Awoniyi, 2010). We suggest that such church based agency or commission should have a network link with agencies like Oxfam, War on Want, Live Aid and School, Aid inspired by Bob Gedaf and with international monetary bodies like International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank for necessary partnership assistance.

Finally, the Christians organizations should re-define their mission from one that focuses primarily on the saving of souls from eternal damnation to one that directly addresses the misery and poverty lived by many people: The church should address spiritual as well as material needs by cultivating a new mind-set similar to the notion of the mission church' in the colonial era in which the Bible and the: plough-were understood as mutually re-enforcing. The church should serve as effective representative for marginalized segments of the society at the national, state and local levels.

Conclusion

In the light of what has been said above, it will not be out of place to claim that the only viable theologisation worthy to embark : upon today in Nigeria is that which makes meaning to the African in his existential situation. This; means the extension of the gospel of freedom, liberty and salvation for the soul and body as Jesus declared it two thousand years ago (Luke 4:18). The presence of poverty in our society contradicts the ideals of Christian brotherhood which rejects all ideas of hunger, destitute, suffering and. other forms of social preference and discriminations.

Finally, we conclude this paper by quoting a passage, from the Bible, which I believe is germane to what I have been discussing:

Two things, I ask of thee; deny them not to me before I die; remove far from me falsehood and lying; give neither poverty nor riches; Feed me with the food that is needful for me; Lest I be fall, and deny thee and say Who is the Lord? Or lest, be poor and steal and profane the name of God (Proverbs 30: 7 - 9).

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